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Sweet Talk: Four Songs on Text by Toni Morrison

Composed by Richard Danielpour,
premiered by Jessye Norman

BY MARK SCHOOPS

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison had written some lyrics that she wanted composer Richard Danielpour to set to music. She read them to him, he recalls, and then "I said, 'You know who would be perfect to sing these songs?' And just as I was saying it, the words simultaneously came out of her mouth, too: Jessye Norman."

At Carnegie Hall last Sunday (April 20), Norman premiered the Danielpour-Morrison song cycle, called *Sweet Talk*. The lyrics grapple with "happiness, what it means to feel safe, bounty, faith—these general terms that are parts of our yearning but which have lost meaning in daily life, or been distorted in some way," the author says. The songs came from her work on a novel, not yet finished, which plumbs the meaning of paradise. "With Jessye I felt I could attack these large, vague, lumpy ideas, and she would make them precise, give them all the color they needed."

And Norman did. In perfect voice, she rendered the songs as expressively as Morrison and Danielpour could have hoped. (With superb piano support from Mark Markham, she also gave breathtaking renditions of Brahms and Schubert lieder, and Poulenc's *La Fraîcheur et le feu*.)

Though each of the four songs in the cycle—"I am not prey," "Perfect Ease," "Bliss," and "Faith"—can stand alone, they are also interrelated, moving, as Danielpour puts it, in a single arc. With accompaniment by piano, cello, and bass, that arc is melancholy, even mournful. This paradise is not found in the City of God but is hollowed out of our City of Man.

from which one must wrest moments of safety.

Such intellectual concordance between words and music was satisfying, but there was a slight emotional rift. "The music and the poetry were both beautiful, but they were beautiful in different ways," my companion remarked. Indeed, Morrison is more earthy, Danielpour more Romantic. But the second song, "Perfect Ease," came closest to a true marriage.

This song explores bounty—"not excess," says Morrison, but "the melon that has just one more slice." It opens with the bass plucking as it might in a jazz cabaret, and then Norman singing, "The perfect ease of grain/Time enough to spill." Asks Danielpour, "How do you describe something so sensual?" His solution: to give Norman a glissando and have her "hum—and not just hum but for the closed mouth to open." That hum-becoming-voice is "like tasting what the poem is saying," says Danielpour, and he's right.

Danielpour says "Bliss," the third song, is "almost a tribute to Stevie Wonder." (His favorite pop singers are either black or "white artists who do good imitations of them," he says. "Mick Jagger is really Tina Turner.") Morrison says bliss is an emotion "you can't scratch for." Instead, in rising, exuberant notes that Wonder could easily sing, "It comes. It comes."

The cycle ends with "Faith," which contains some of Morrison's best language, and which suggests immortality. In characteristic Danielpour style, it closes with a high cello note that leaves rhythm far below and floats into silence.

What's a white Jewish boy doing setting Toni Morrison poems for Jessye Norman?" Danielpour asks, almost preemptively. It would be easy to ascribe the imperfect match between *Sweet Talk*'s music and lyrics to the cultural difference between poet and composer. But Danielpour, whose mother fled across North Africa to escape Rommel, points out that the emotions in the songs are "human." And in many ways, Danielpour and Morrison make a good artistic pair.

When Morrison is working hard on a novel, the only other thing she can write is lyrics, because "I don't have to struggle." In fiction, "I might write a sentence a certain way in order to insist that it be heard a certain way. But when I work with a composer he provides the scary part or the suggestive part, or the sexual part. The music does that."

To draw out these emotions, Danielpour starts with cadence: "There is an inherent sense of rhythm, and consequently music, in every text." He cites the "Lachrymosa" in the Requiem mass: In its slow beat, he says, Verdi heard the heavy footsteps of pallbearers, and Mozart the heaving breath

of sobs. Danielpour notes how he syncopated a line in "Bliss"—"The jeweled feet of women dance the earth"—and says, "That's not how you'd ever say it. But you can only go against the natural rhythm once you know what it is."

Morrison describes her lyrics as a "palm to hold the music." Occasionally Danielpour's music spilled out, but when it did, the sound of its falling was exquisite.



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"I am not prey" describes a woman who feels safe walking on a country road at night: "Teeth may cut a smile in half," the lyrics say, "but here in this place I am not prey." As a black woman, Morrison must know how rare such security is. The song ends with piano and cello striking strong, rhythmic chords that suggest not only inner fortitude but the lurking violence